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ABSTRACT

Virtually every country in Europe discovered in the late 1970s that a section of its population had serious difficulties in using written language. Examined from an historical angle, this phenomenon can be seen as part of a complicated set of factors. Urban France can be said to have been fully literate by the late eighteenth century, especially in the north. Literacy rates crossed the 90% threshold in 1888 for men and 1895 for women. It was not until the 1960s that the public became aware that French schoolchildren were taking too long to complete their compulsory schooling. The system of parallel but alien educational institutions (primary and secondary) came to an end in the 1960s as families began to demand of the schooling system more education and qualifications for their children. In 1975, a 4-year common-core curriculum to follow the 5 years of primary schooling was implemented. In addition, the school system established structures for assisting children with learning difficulties. In France technical and vocational training developed relatively late. Apprentice schools remained aloof from the educational controversies but were thrown off balance when in 1963, the common-core curriculum meant that technical and vocational education was postponed until pupils had been channeled into different forms of education. Academic failure in the 1970s was a problem at both ends of the school system: at the beginning of compulsory schooling when children had to learn how to read, and at the end when there was no way out other than early entry into apprenticeship (when it had to be admitted that not every schoolchild knew how to read). (RS)

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CHANGES IN SYSTEMS FOR TEACHING CHILDREN TO READ: THE EMERGENCE OF NEW REQUIREMENTS FOR EUROPEAN SCHOOL EDUCATION SYSTEMS

THE SITUATION IN FRANCE

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Changes in systems for teaching children to read: the emergence of new requirements for European school education systems. The situation in France

Virtually every country in Europe discovered in the late 1970s that a section of its population had serious difficulties in using written language. Countries which had, for a long time, been considered literate, were now confronted by three problems: they had, simultaneously, to find new concepts to designate the phenomenon (the French word used was "illettrisme"), to endeavour to understand the causes and to find appropriate remedies. In the initial headlong rush, which was often fuelled by emotion, researchers and decision-makers tended to see this phenomenon as a unique, uniform socio-educational fact which could be accounted for in two clear-cut ways: the inability of exhausted school systems to deal with groups of pupils who were manifestly more difficult to educate (academic failure was more common than success) and the development of a new form of urban or suburban poverty, which meant that cultural and occupational behaviour patterns left people much less able to cope in a world which sets increasing store by the written word.

If this phenomenon is examined from an historical angle, it can be seen, in European terms, to be a part of a complicated set of factors which shatters the illusion of homogeneity. Three aspects in particular merit examination: the (contemporary) history of the teaching of children to read and write in the countries concerned, an historical analysis of decisions taken with regard to schooling and vocational training, and developments in the supply of culture. The "invention" of illiteracy (illettrisme) must be seen in this three-fold context if we are to imagine which kinds of research are likely to open up new avenues for progress in the education and training of the new generations, who will live in an increasingly complex world - a world which, we hope, will be more demanding.

How the French have been taught to read and write over the centuries

The history of literacy differs enormously from one European country to another. Areas with a long-standing tradition of teaching people to read and write (which may date back as far as the 18th century, as in Scotland) are found next to areas where the process is more recent and literacy rates of over 90% were not reached until the 1950s (eg most of Southern Europe). Alongside areas where people learned to read and write outside school (eg Sweden in the 17th and 18th centuries) are areas where they did so as a result of a strictly regulated and centralised schooling system, such as Prussia or France. Mass literacy came about in Reformist countries, whereas the neighbouring countries, more strongly influenced by the Counter-Reformation, saw a more sociologically segregationist approach to the elimination of illiteracy.

People became literate in Europe between the 17th and 19th centuries. The ways of bringing the people this knowledge and skill have been many and varied. In France, the monopoly on writing was not really taken away from clerics until the end of the 15th century, and it was not until the Reformation that the urban bourgeoisie, whether or not it was influenced by new ideas, really invested in educating

its children. But by the late 17th century, a little earlier in the North, the Catholic Church was heading a charitable education movement which aimed to give even the lower urban classes basic reading and writing skills. Obviously the objective was a religious one - in keeping with the Counter-Reformation - but it was not limited to reading alone: it included the teaching of writing and arithmetic. Urban France can be said to have been fully literate by the late 18th century, especially in the North. Most of the peasantry did not learn to read and write for a long time but, even so, the illiteracy rate began to drop in the 18th century: it was 60% in the 1750s for men and 80% for women. In the same period, the rates in the cities were of 40 and 60% respectively. In the 1820s, before there was a widespread network of schools playing their part, these rates had dropped nation-wide to 47% for men and 67% for women, with rates of 30 and 52% in the towns. However it was not until the 19th century that the differentials between town and country on one hand, and men and women on the other, began to narrow, as the social hierarchy collapsed with the massive literacy drive. In 1854, 31% of men were unable to sign their names when they married, but by 1900 this was true of only 5%. Over that period the percentage of women in the same situation dropped from 46 to 6. The literacy rate crossed the 90% threshold in 1888 in the case of men and 1895 in the case of women, and at the turn of the century an equal rate for both sexes was attained. Declarations by conscripts confirmed this trend in the case of men. In 1880 as many as 14% still admitted to being unable to read or write. By 1914 the figure had dropped to 2%. Illiteracy rates edged up between the wars (because of insufficient schooling between 1914 and 1918) but then declined steadily, to less than 1% by the mid-1960s.

We can look at the situation in France in the light of major developments in historical research in recent years and see whether these progressive but uneven rises in literacy rates went hand-in-hand with economic development. In the 1960s and 1970s researchers like Lawrence Stone and Gian Maria Cippola looked at the role played by the widespread teaching of the "three Rs" as economies took off in countries like England and France in the 18th and 19th centuries, could not pinpoint any specific cause-and-effect relationship. Economic growth and demand for education and literacy are rather like the chicken and the egg. The 19th-century industrial revolution mostly affected rural communities, which were a long way behind in terms of literacy, whereas workers and craftsmen in large cities, who had been literate since the 18th century, were more likely to safeguard the existence of the small workshop or traditional shop. In countries where industrialisation took place later, eg Italy, the same phenomena seem to have been in evidence.

Another approach is to consider the links between schools and the eradication of illiteracy and look not so much at the consequences as at the ways in which mass literacy was achieved. France provides an example, if ever there was one, of political resolve: François Furet and Jacques Ozouf demonstrated that most of the progress in fighting illiteracy was made before schooling became widespread: it was because demand increased that conditions were propitious for the institutionalisation of schooling. The spread of this demand outside the towns and cities, where it began, was certainly caused in part by the relatively comfortable living conditions which developed between the 18th and 19th centuries in the rich countryside of Northern and

Eastern France, where open-field farming was practised. In those parts of the country farming was sufficiently profitable for communities to afford a schoolteacher for their children even before state education was introduced. With the beginning of universal schooling (in 1833 for boys and in 1851 for girls), all that remained for the teacher to do was to inculcate knowledge and skills, for which everyone was waiting impatiently.

What reading skills are schools expected to provide? Changes in requirements in the light of the objectives of the school education system

Schooling was made compulsory in France in 1882 (under the "Jules Ferry" Laws). This coincided with the beginning of the very last stage in the literacy drive. In this case the ulterior motives were political rather than social, as had been the case in 1883, when the state took the first steps towards universal schooling. Then the motive was to civilise the masses because it had been feared, since the Revolution, that their passions would spark off a rebellion. This time, the aim was to bring rural voters round to a moderate Republic since the urban electorate was proving too susceptible to the clarion cause of socialism. Schools under the 3rd Republic were free and secular and were therefore essentially ideological. This was possible only because they depended on there being a fairly wide mass of literate people. The school textbook came to be read at home as well as in the classroom, being aimed at parents as well as their children: it was a shared reference. Books like "Tour de la France par deux enfants" (and its Italian equivalent, "Cuore") catered for a nation of people who all knew how to read and write. It should come as no surprise therefore that, following the Great War, when the legitimacy of the Republic had apparently ceased to be in issue, the French school education system put the fighting of illiteracy, like inculcation, behind it. Its task now was to renew ordinary skills, generation after generation, in a nation which had become important. The official instructions of 1923, which were to remain in effect until 1971, show how quietly confident the legislator was. Learning to read, write and count was not as complicated as educational pioneers, always on the lookout for an original teaching method, had imagined. All it took was a few months with a little authority. The schoolmaster was the only person to decide which method to use: he was guided by his common sense.

It was not until the 1960s that this stronghold of certainties began to show cracks. Not that there was the slightest concern at the time over the resurgence of illiteracy (the rates gauged when young men began military service continued to edge down). The concern stemmed from public awareness of a previously unnoticed phenomenon: French schoolchildren were taking far longer than was prescribed by the regulations to complete their compulsory schooling.

Until then, it is true, the French school education system, although it combined two parallel but mutually alien institutions (primary and secondary) had managed to paper over this crack. A child started primary school at the age of six and left at fourteen (the school leaving age since 1936) without anyone's really caring about the level he had reached. "Single class" schools, ie those where a single master taught all the children in a village regardless of age, were still the most common type in France, essentially a rural

country, and "dunces" whiled away many a happy day there. As a rule, only the best pupils sat the certificate of primary studies, while the others patiently waited until they were old enough to leave school, unless they left early, without a fuss and with the tacit approval of the authorities.

In the secondary schools ("collèges" and "lycées"), attended only by the urban middle classes, a kind of educational Malthusianism led many families to moderate their ambitions: it was not unusual for children with difficulties at school to leave before the "baccalauréat", and many girls did so whether or not they were good pupils.

This situation came to an end in the 1960s and families, from whichever social stratum, began to demand of the schooling system more education and qualifications for their children. Since between the wars, successive education ministries had tried to counteract the two-tier nature of the French schooling system by making secondary schooling follow on from primary schooling rather than have two separate systems. They abolished small classes in the "lycées", introduced transition arrangements to help newcomers from primary school adapt to the first year of secondary school and grants to help families, organised modern sections without Latin classes in the "lycées", and, even attempted, as far back as 1937, to organise a guidance system at the beginning of middle school to decide which pupils should do a short time at school, which should stay on longer and which should receive a technical education. These measures came up against teachers' and leading citizens' conservatism and met with families' indifference.

In the late 1950s, when France began in no uncertain terms to modernise its economy and its way of life, demand for education became all the more pressing. In the case of the rural population (still around half the French population), the transition from primary to secondary education was made through the "cours complémentaire" (complementary class): the establishments in question were attached to primary schools and made use of their best teachers. They were not expensive but they worked well. They syponed off the best primary school pupils and brought them, with a four-year course beginning after the fifth year (ie before the primary studies certificate) up to the "brevet" (BEPC). At the end of this cycle, the door was fairly wide open to the baccalauréat (either via the "écoles normales d'instituteurs" or via the M' sections of the "lycées" and "collèges modernes", which taught no Latin and only one modern language). Owing to the learning centres, technical education also made it possible to gain a qualification (CAP) at the end of compulsory primary schooling or, after a transfer in the third form (fourth class in France) of "collège" or complementary classes, to a technical college, to prepare for a "brevet de technicien".

In short, there was no longer any need to waste time at primary school if one wanted to go on to these complementary forms of education: the first five years of schooling (from CP to CM2) effectively became the basis for future schooling rather than merely providing the stock of knowledge expected of the man in the street. As of 1959, the Education Ministry began to measure the time taken by each pupil to complete this five-year "cursus" and being behind

gradually became the most obvious criterion for academic failure. The figures were appalling: around 50% of the population took over five years to complete the primary school cycle, and it became immediately obvious that it was in the first year that the split emerged between those who would go through school without problems, and the others, in other words, the split occurred when children learned to read.

In France the 1960s and 70s were characterised, therefore, by two preoccupations. How could the schooling system be organised to extend general education for all children to include subjects which were previously taught only in secondary school, and how could primary schooling be made more efficient, especially with regard to the teaching of reading, in order to prevent early failure, which in effect put an end to any extension to schooling?

The reply to the first question came with the creation of the "collège unique", in 1975, after 15 years' tentative efforts, ie a four-year common-core curriculum after the five years of primary schooling, up to the fourth form of "collège". The years of compulsory schooling (from 6 to 16 years since 1959) were thus based on a "cursus" ending with syllabuses taken from traditional secondary studies. This raised the many problems of teaching not just a small proportion of pupils but virtually all of a single class of the same age these abstract and difficult subjects.

The reply to the second question essentially came from the launch of a proper standing forum for looking into means of access to reading and written culture. This aspect of learning, which had previously been seen as automatic, was suddenly found to be fiercesomely difficult. Initially, in the 1960s, medically oriented approaches won the day. Dyslexia made its appearance and, with it, various non-school structures (mental care clinics, medico-psycho-educational centres, etc), which were designed to remedy the schooling problems caused by dyslexia. New professions (paedo-psychiatrists, speech therapists, psychoanalysts, psychotherapists, psycho-education rehabilitation experts, etc) claimed that they were able to deal with children who had difficulties in learning to read at school. Gradually, the schooling system itself set up its own structures for assisting children with difficulties (remedial classes, psycho-educational assistance groups, etc).

Later, from 1971 till the end of the 1970s, a more sociological approach was taken to the analysis of the phenomenon and the search for appropriate solutions. Nursery schools were seen as playing a decisive role and it was widely believed that good preparation for learning to read (via an improvement in the child's linguistic abilities) could allow children from less favoured backgrounds to escape the sociologically predestined failure which awaited them. Similarly, as of 1981, it appeared that the traditional egalitarian approach of French schools could not accommodate situations thrown up by inner-city poverty, given the problems of massive immigration in the years before the oil crisis and the unemployment which resulted from that crisis. Children from culturally less favoured family backgrounds had to be given more education.

At the same time, beginning in 1976, a new look was taken at methods for learning to read and teaching children to read. This time it was not so much that there was argument about methods as that new hypotheses born of linguistics and cognitive psychology were used to seek didactic principles which would not only prevent early academic failure but also improve reading levels at the end of primary school: knowing how to read was no longer considered an end in itself, but the best means of ensuring a long and successful school career.

By the end of the 1970s, conditions were such that it was possible to take a new look at means of access to written culture in a country which still considered that the fight against illiteracy had been won some three-quarters of a century earlier.

However, any analysis of the situation which gave rise to "illettrisme" (illiteracy) in France would not be complete without a close examination of what took place in the same period in the area of technical and vocational training, whether for adolescents or adults.

Provision of vocational training at school and the discovery of "poor skills"

In France technical and vocational training developed relatively late. Until the second half of the 20th century, only a very small fraction of schoolchildren received any: between the wars, out of 650,000 to 700,000 young people, only 20 to 25,000 received any technical or vocational training at school. To the rural population, which accounted for over a third of the work force at the time, the very idea of such training was perfectly incongruous. Young people learned a trade "on the job" and, despite the Astier Law of 1919, very few regional authorities organised classes for apprentices. One of the main problems faced by the Front Populaire Government in the lead-up to the Second World War was a shortage of skilled labour.

After the defeat of 1940, schools began to provide classes for apprentices. The aim was not so much to develop new skills - the time was not ripe - as to enrol young jobless, whose numbers grew as the shortage of skilled labour worsened. This training, although completely improvised, was immediately a great success: there were 300 centres by 1940 and 897 by 1944, with a total of 56,000 pupils. When France was liberated, the principle was kept and the system was given a structure: "Ecoles normales nationales d'apprentissages" were set up to train teachers and a statute and a name (Centre d'apprentissage) were given to the training centres, which were already teaching over 100,000 pupils. They recruited adolescents who had finished their primary schooling without sufficiently good results to embark on secondary education in complementary classes: pupils who had difficulties, but not to the point of their being completely rejected, since the upper classes of primary schools accepted poor pupils. There were also pupils who, at the end of their three years' schooling, were in possession of the CAP ("Certificat d'apprentissage professionnel" - Professional apprenticeship certificate), which was given full recognition on the labour market.

In the 1960s, while the numbers of schoolchildren in general education increased in geometric progression and the debate on the unification of compulsory schooling raged on, the "Centres d'apprentissage" remained aloof from this controversy and continued to

expand (170,000 pupils in 1959, when the school-leaving age was raised to 16). It was the reforms in general education which threw this system off balance. When, in 1963, the common-core curriculum began to be introduced in middle school, then known as CES or CEG ("Collège d'enseignement secondaire" or "Collège d'enseignement général") (Fouchet Reform) all lower secondary school pupils followed the same curriculum. This meant that technical and vocational education were postponed until pupils had been channelled into different forms of education (in the fourth form): from then on the CAP was to be prepared from the age of 16 and not 14. This study cycle was also introduced into the "collèges d'enseignment technique" (technical education schools) alongside other forms of training. Technical education was beginning to be given more status, particularly the "long" technical course, which, in the space of a few years, was crowned with the baccalauréat (1965). At the same time, vocational training through direct work experience began to lose favour. The old means of integrating the young into working life, with all its restrictions, was considered to have all the defects of an out-dated system: it was only fit for manual jobs, which were becoming less skilled; it provided small businessmen with cheap labour; it no longer suited adolescents, who were rebelling against all kinds of authority, and it was taken up only by the worst pupils - those who hardly could read. The word was dropped: apprenticeship, which had given skilled jobs to many young people in rural areas, who were, admittedly not cut out for intellectual work but were not, all in all, such bad pupils, ended up as a rubbish dump for unteachable children. Even though special streams were created for them in the first years of the "collèges", it was no longer possible to make the system work. Hence the attempts, in 1971 and 1973, to revamp direct apprenticeship: it was made possible for a pupil to start work with an employer at the age of 15 if he or she had finished the first cycle, and to do a sandwich course as from the age of 14. The aim was to integrate young people fully in society even though integration at school had failed and so avoid creating a situation in schools whereby groups of youths let themselves be attracted by all kinds of illicit behaviour, biding their time until they could leave a system which had been unable to do anything for them.

Clearly, academic failure in the 1970s was a problem at both ends of the school system: the beginning of compulsory schooling, starting with the first year, when children had to learn to read and at the end of compulsory schooling, when there was no way out other than early entry into apprenticeship (or, before long, after the second oil crisis, unemployment), and it had to be admitted that not every schoolchild knew how to read. Early failure became apparent as secondary education become more widely developed: children had to learn to read more quickly and to a higher level if the whole class was to go on to secondary school. But it also became apparent as a result of the increasing tendency for children to learn skills at school rather than on the job: if a child had to wait until the school-leaving age to learn a trade, he or she could not escape the harsh necessities of learning school subjects and, in particular, the most important subject: reading. It was not yet a case of illiteracy, but only of schooling failure at school.